

**Statement of Chairman Tom Davis  
Government Reform Committee Hearing  
“Knives, Box Cutters, and Bleach: A Review of Passenger Screener  
Training, Testing and Supervision”  
November 20, 2003**

We are here today to examine a key aspect of airport security: passenger screeners. This is the Committee’s first hearing into airport security issues, but it’s a good bet it will not be the last. There is no alternative but success in securing our nation’s air system. As such, it is critical that Congress, and this Committee in particular, be vigilant in our oversight obligations. That is why last month, this Committee started an extensive review of the Transportation Security Administration’s operations, with a specific focus on passenger and baggage screeners. This review was prompted by the discovery of weapons and other prohibited items on two Southwest Airline planes on October 16<sup>th</sup>; as well as the recent reports from the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General Report and the General Accounting Office that cited significant weaknesses in the testing and training procedures for TSA airport screeners.

Approximately 1.8 million travelers a day pass through checkpoints at more than 400 U.S. airports. The daunting task of protecting America’s transportation system could not be more critical in today’s threat environment. The good news is that in just two years, TSA has made tremendous progress promoting security by hiring and training 48,000 federal passenger screeners. The screeners are better paid and better trained, and we are safer today because of it. TSA passenger screeners have seized significant numbers of prohibited items from passengers going through

security checkpoints. But despite this fact and the realization that not all prohibited items will be detected at passenger checkpoints, these recent security breaches have highlighted possible weaknesses in the system that need to be addressed.

In six separate incidents, beginning February 7, 2003 and ending September 14, 2003, Mr. Nat Heatwole, a twenty-year-old college student, was allegedly able to get prohibited items, including box cutter blades, knives, and liquid bleach, past airport passenger screeners and onto aircraft. Notes accompanying the items he allegedly left on the aircraft indicated that the items were intended to test the TSA checkpoint security procedures. On September 15, 2003, TSA's Contact Center also received an e-mail message from Mr. Heatwole concerning the security breaches; however, the message was not delivered to appropriate TSA officials until October, 17, 2003, **AFTER** some of the prohibited items had been accidentally found and **AFTER** TSA ordered 7,000 aircraft to be searched.

The delay in identifying Mr. Heatwole's September 15<sup>th</sup> e-mail as an important message that required immediate action highlighted problems with TSA's Contact Center. The Committee understands that TSA has identified the problems within the Contact Center and has modified procedures by which messages are handled at the Center. This last Friday, I went on a tour of the Transportation Security Coordination Center, which utilizes information from the Contact Center, the Federal Air Marshals, and other sources to take action in cases of aviation security concerns. From what I saw, the Coordination Center stands ready twenty-fours a day, seven days a week, to act on aviation emergencies, but it must receive timely information

to take action. We look forward to hearing the steps TSA has taken to remedy the problem to ensure that future security-related messages, like Mr. Heatwole's, are immediately analyzed by TSA staff and that appropriate action is taken.

I understand that Mr. Heatwole has cooperated fully with the TSA, and FBI, and he has been forthcoming with this Committee in sharing his intentions behind these security breaches. The public opinion of Mr. Heatwole's actions seems to range from "hero" to "criminal." It is up to the justice system to determine the consequences of his actions. I personally believe we need to discourage this sort of vigilante behavior. It is counterproductive for TSA, law enforcement, and the airlines to waste valuable time and resources on similar incidents when we need them to be looking for real threats. But I do think, we should acknowledge that Mr. Heatwole's actions have provided us a chance to have a thoughtful discussion on improving passenger screening. Experience, no matter its cause or origin, is the best teacher.

In addition to hearing about TSA's reaction to the Nat Heatwole incident today, we also have the opportunity to discuss recent government work to review TSA training, testing and supervision of passenger screeners.

The investigation by DHS IG found that TSA written tests for potential passenger screeners on the operation of explosive detection system machines were designed to maximize the likelihood TSA employees would pass, rather than ensuring that only competent and well-trained employees were responsible for passenger screening. In essence, they've been

“teaching to the test.” More disconcerting was the DHS-IG’s covert testing of passenger security screening operations. According to press articles, IG investigators were able to bring knives, a bomb, and a gun through Boston’s Logan International Airport without being detected.

The GAO report cited deficient supervisory training programs and a failure to collect adequate information on screener performance in detecting threat objects. The report also cited the need for recurrent training for passenger screening, to ensure that screener skills are maintained and enhanced, as new security information becomes available. In addition, the GAO report found that Federal Security Directors, who are responsible for overseeing security at the airports, have expressed concern that they have limited authority to respond to airport-specific staffing needs. These needs include daily and seasonal fluctuations in passenger flow. We look forward to hearing more from GAO about their report during our second panel of witnesses.

TSA has stated that new procedures for passenger screener training and testing are in the works, including new written tests to replace the tests criticized in the DHS IG report. In addition, specific training courses designed for screener supervisors are being developed to improve screener performance. We are anxious to hear about these new changes.

There are currently five pilot program airports that use private companies to provide passenger screener functions. These private companies were responsible for developing and implementing training for passenger screeners prior to the federalization of passenger screeners by TSA and therefore have significant experience in the business of training,

testing, and supervision. We are pleased to have representatives from two of the private pilot program airports, the Kansas City International Airport in Missouri and the Greater Rochester International Airport in New York, on our second panel. We look forward to their testimony and hope to hear about their relationship with TSA, suggestions for improvements with the new federal workforce, and how the pilot program has worked with regard to passenger screener training, testing, and supervision.

The Committee is mindful that the holiday season has begun and that the traveling rush will inevitably result in longer lines at checkpoints. TSA has the immense task of maintaining adequate staffing levels for passenger screening over the next month and a half. At the same time, TSA passenger screeners will face additional pressure to process passengers quickly, despite the fact that they are not permitted to allow passengers into airport sterilized areas without resolving all possible threats identified in both passenger and carry-on baggage checks. But security measures at airports cannot be compromised. As travelers, we need to be prepared for rigorous security checks, and I hope that TSA can give us some advice today about how travelers can smoothly proceed through passenger screening checkpoints.

We look forward to a constructive hearing today – keeping in mind that no system is foolproof. In fact, keeping prohibited items off a passenger plane is but one layer of a multi-layered aviation security strategy, which includes hardened cockpit doors, additional federal air marshals, and armed pilots. The airlines have taken their own steps to increase the number of layers, by training their flight attendants in self-defense, for example. However, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and we are hopeful

that our oversight of TSA passenger screener training, testing, and supervision will improve overall aviation security.